

Abraham Lincoln

A Most Unlikely Military Man



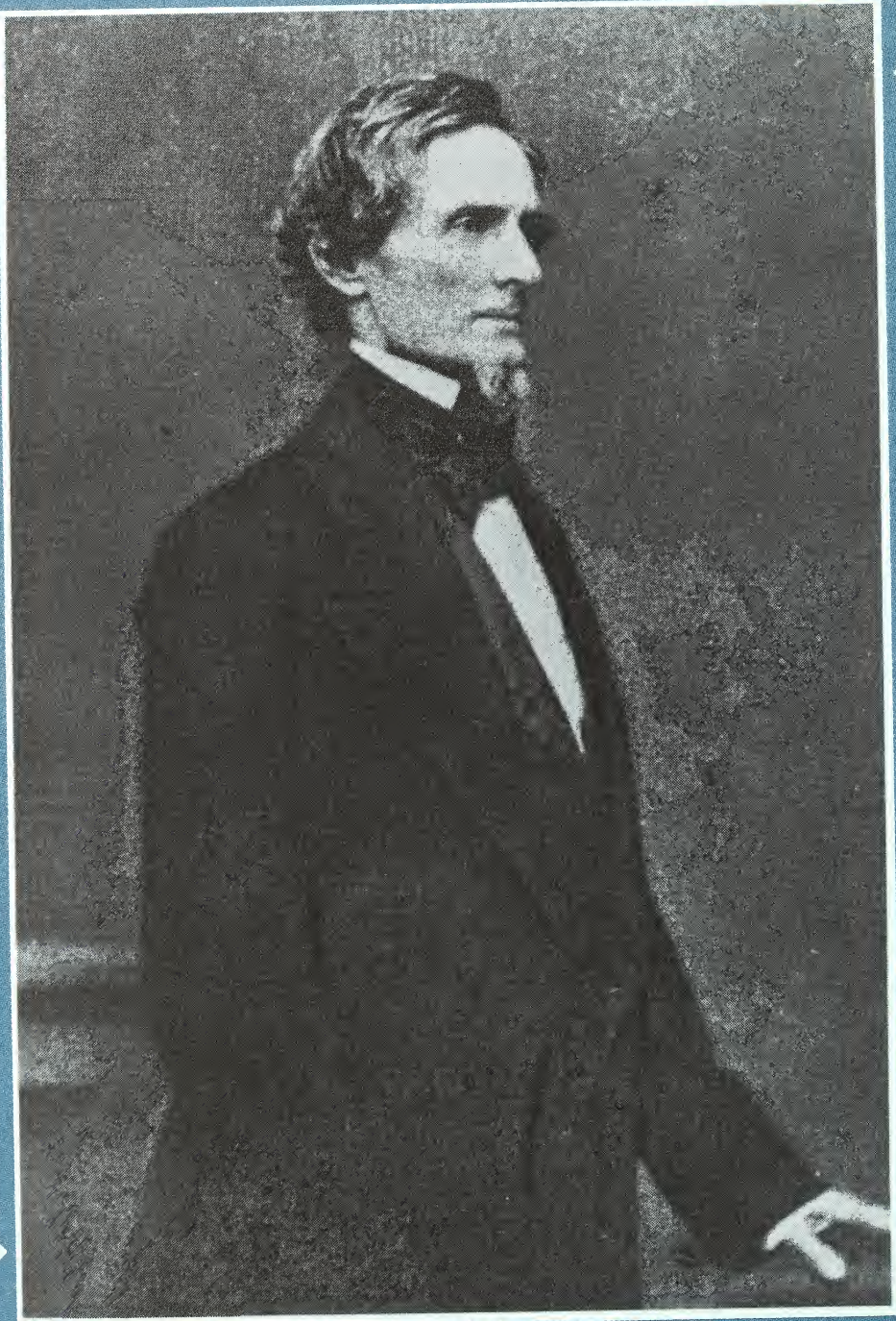


The old man sits here and wields like a
backwoods Jupiter the bolts of war and the
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equally steady & equally firm.



LINC
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Jefferson Davis



n September, 1863, two months after the Northern victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, Presidential Secretary John Hay wrote his colleague John G. Nicolay concerning Abraham Lincoln's abilities as a war leader:



... some well-meaning newspapers advise the President to keep his fingers out of the military pie: and all that sort of thing. The truth is, if he did, the pie would be a sorry mess. The old man sits here and wields like a backwoods Jupiter the bolts of war and the machinery of government with a hand equally steady & equally firm.



Through the years many Lincoln students have come to share Hay's opinion of Lincoln as "a backwoods Jupiter," an advanced military strategist. But others have criticized him as an amateur, whose meddling cost thousands of lives and prolonged the Civil War. On balance, Lincoln emerges as an extremely competent commander-in-chief, one who made lasting contributions to the office. But few Americans in 1861, or even in 1863, recognized his native genius as a strategist. Most looked to his Southern rival, Jefferson Davis, as the consummate military-statesman of the age.

One of the great ironies of the Civil War was that Lincoln came to outshine Davis as a war President and commander-in-chief. On the eve of the war this outcome seemed unlikely. The two men were as different in military background as they were in political and social origins. Not only did Lincoln come to surpass Davis as a war leader, but the Rail-splitter established the unified command system relied upon by his successors.



General Winfield Scott



he contrast between Lincoln and Davis is most striking in their respective military training. Davis graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point in 1828 and served with valor in the Mexican War. His use of the “V formation” at the battle of Buena Vista earned for him a hero’s reputation. Because of his experience as a combat officer, Davis was appointed Secretary of War in the cabinet of President Franklin Pierce, 1853-1857. In this capacity Davis distinguished himself as an efficient and innovative military administrator. Davis—slender, tall, erect, and trained to command as a Southern slaveholder—looked the part of a military figure. Lincoln, lank, gawky, and awkward, resembled a civilian. Indeed, he was the epitome of the civilian by habit, experience, and vision.

Unlike Davis, Lincoln was untutored in the soldier’s art. What little military experience he had was acquired when, at age twenty-three, he served for seven weeks as captain of a rag-tag militia company in the Black Hawk War. This was actually little more than a skirmish with the Sac and Fox Indians along the Illinois frontier. Lincoln often joked about his ill-fated military record. In 1848, for example, Congressman Lincoln facetiously asked the Speaker of the House of Representatives: “did you know I am a military hero? Yes sir; in the days of the Black Hawk War, I fought, bled, and came away.” Although he witnessed no “live, fighting Indians,” Lincoln claimed to have fought “a good many bloody struggles with the mosquitoes.” And Lincoln appears to have inspired more humor than gallantry as a leader of men. Once, when marching his company toward a narrow gate, he forgot the correct command to order his men to form a single column so they could advance. “Halt!” Lincoln finally shouted, “This company will break ranks for two minutes and form again on the other side of the gate.” No matter how he disparaged his military career, Lincoln learned more from his service in the Black Hawk War than even he realized. “It is possible,” writes T. Harry Williams, “that his campaign against the Indians gave him a valuable insight into the psychology of the citizen soldier, the kind of men who would compose the armies of the Civil War.”

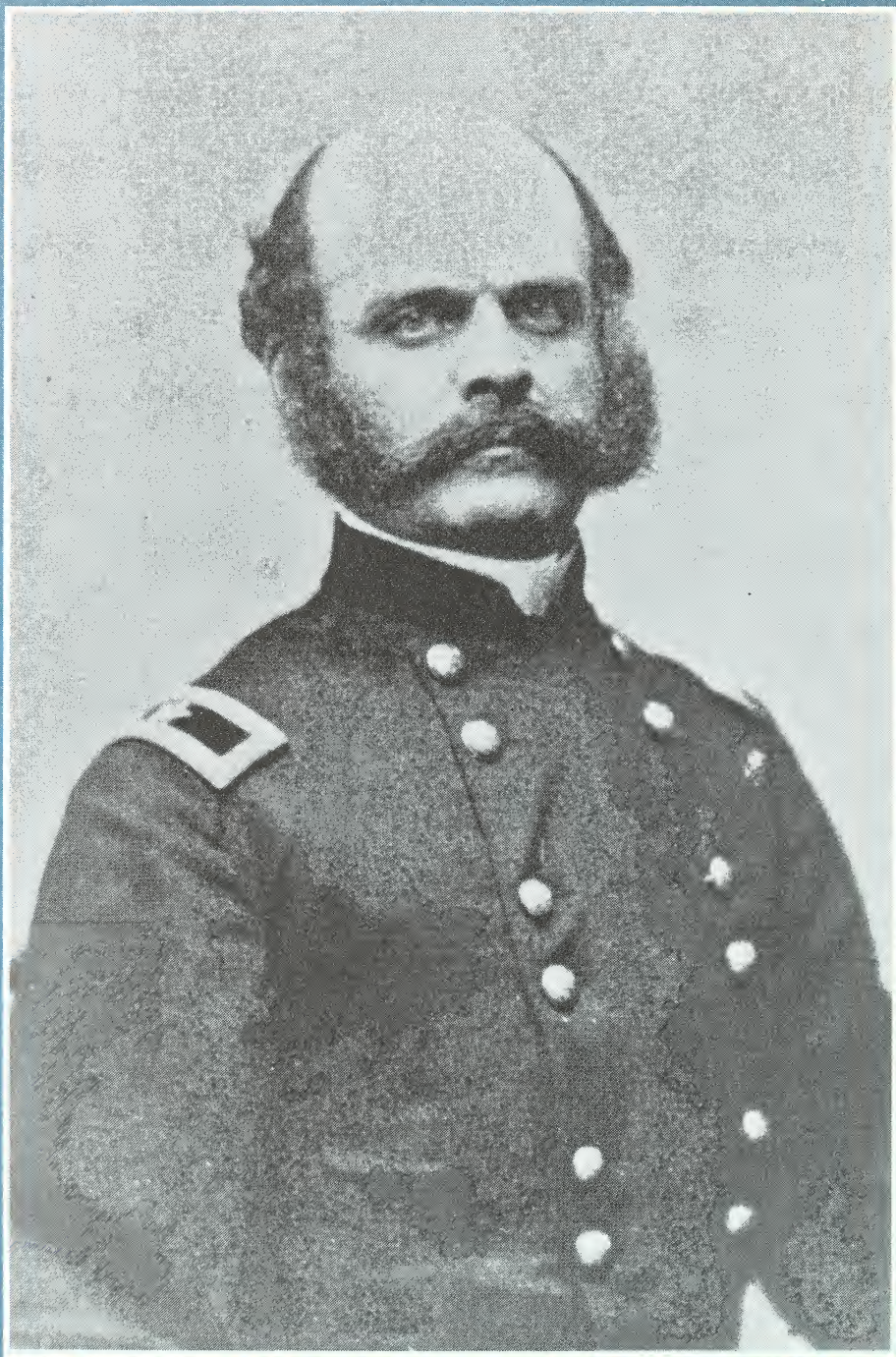


General George B. McClellan



Despite his own disclaimers, Lincoln's inadequacies as a soldier were more apparent than real. In fact, the seeds for his rise to greatness as a commander-in-chief were planted early in life. Lincoln possessed to a great degree those elements—"a remarkable, superior mind and strength of character"—which the German military theorist Carl Von Clausewitz identified as fundamental to the makeup of a war leader. From his youth, Lincoln developed a strong will, a sense of resolution, a desire to succeed. These traits, coupled with a certain flexibility and pragmatism, lifted the uneducated prairie lawyer beyond the learned Davis as a war leader. Lacking experience in the regular army, Lincoln was a veteran of political warfare. A realist, Lincoln understood what was required if the Union was to be preserved. Unlike Davis, and most of his own generals as well, Lincoln grasped the fundamentals of modern war.

American military thought at mid-nineteenth century was dictated by the writings of Henri Jomini. This brilliant Swiss theorist served on Napoleon's staff and espoused what in his day became the accepted doctrines of warfare. According to Jomini's maxims, wars were fought between large armies commanded by a professional officer class. Battles were comparatively bloodless; a soldier's objective was to outmaneuver his opponent and force his surrender. Jomini counseled strategists to mass their resources—armies and supplies—at one point for a central, concentrated offensive against the enemy. Frequently the objective was the capture of a key city, such as a capital, which had symbolic value to one's foe. These principles of war looked backward to the eighteenth century for their origin. They were geared more to a limited war of small European nation states than to a fiercely-contested brothers' war on a vast continent. Jomini's battles were fought with muzzle-loading rifles of limited range. But the American Civil War, as Lincoln realized, rendered the rule books obsolete. Breech-loading, repeating rifles, long range artillery, mortars, mines, ironclad ships, reconnaissance balloons, submarines—weaponry of a new-found lethal efficiency—called for new rules for a new type of war.



General Ambrose E. Burnside



Unlike many journalists and politicians, Lincoln recognized that the Civil War would be a long, internecine struggle. After all, the Confederacy had certain natural advantages. It was fighting a war for independence and could muster the enthusiasm of its people for a revolutionary cause. Because most of the battles were fought on Southern soil, Confederate armies drew upon shorter lines of supply and communication than their opponents. The South was fighting for its survival as a nation and called upon its entire population to repel the dreaded northern invaders.

Lincoln understood that the North could win the war only if it used effectively its vast superiority in manpower, transportation, and supply. In the first three years of the war, however, he failed to find a field commander who would exploit these advantages. Instead, Lincoln entrusted the Union military fortunes to a string of hapless and ineffectual Generals—McDowell, McClellan, Burnside, Pope, and others. The road to Union victory was cleared when the President finally placed military command in the hands of Grant and Sherman. Like Lincoln, these Generals realized that the Union could be preserved only if it fought a total war. Anything less would result in Confederate independence.

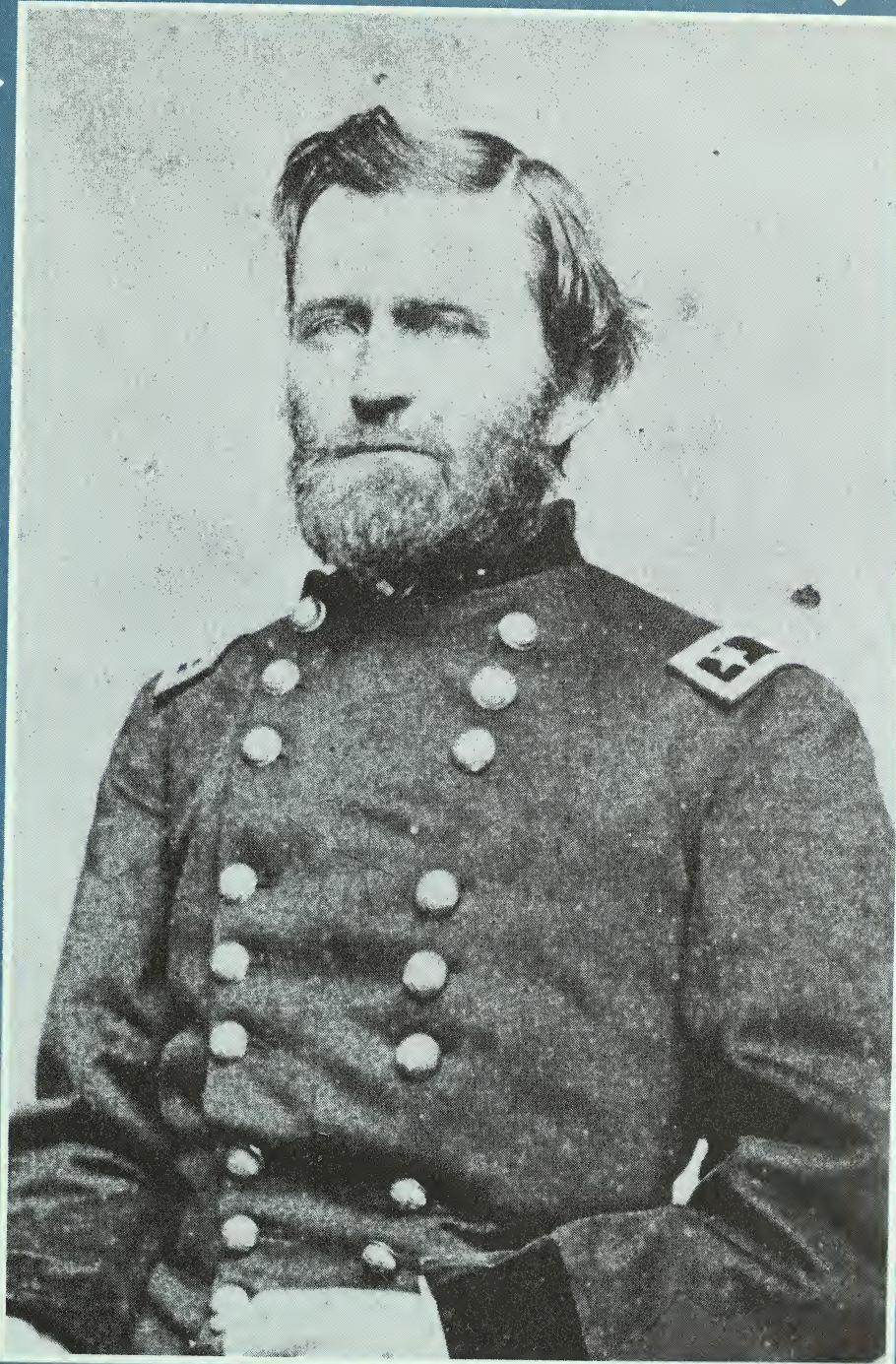
Although slow to find a commander who would subdue the South, Lincoln gradually grasped the fundamentals of all-out, modern warfare. Compared with the battle plans proposed by his early advisors, the President's strategy was bold and imaginative. Rejecting Jomini's principle of concentration, Lincoln ordered several simultaneous offensives—in different theatres—designed to crush the South. Insisting that civilian authorities would have a voice in the direction of the Northern war effort, Lincoln hounded his generals to maintain constant pressure on the entire periphery of the Confederacy until a weak spot emerged. Lincoln urged upon his commanders the importance of defeating the enemy's armies, crushing its industrial base, and destroying its will to fight. He was less concerned with occupying Southern territory than with winning the war.







Lincoln's first move—in April, 1861—was to declare a naval blockade of the entire Southern coastline. Designed to attack the Confederacy at its vulnerable economic underbelly, the blockade reveals Lincoln's fundamental understanding of the importance of economics. He next called for the mobilization of 400,000 men—a huge army when contrasted with the 14,000-man American force which fought in the Mexican War. Throughout the war, Lincoln's military thought was shaped by expediency. He recognized that he had to break with the old tenets of war. Among the President's more radical moves was his decision to free and arm the slaves. With this bold strike at the South's "peculiar institution" Lincoln accomplished three key goals: he provided needed manpower for the Union Armies; he weakened the South's labor force; and he inspired Afro-Americans, North and South, to suppress the rebellion. Other innovations reveal Lincoln's understanding of the concept of total war. He authorized the devastating marches led by Sherman in Georgia and North Carolina, and by Sheridan in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. Late in the war he refused to exchange prisoners with the Confederacy. Each rebel soldier returned to his unit, reasoned Lincoln, would help prolong the war. And Lincoln was the first commander-in-chief to declare medicines contraband of war. Conscription, suspension of the writ of habeas corpus, political arrests, suppression of the press—all were measures prone to chafe a nation which boasted of its democratic character. But Lincoln urged Northerners to sacrifice in order to restore the Union. His plan to destroy the South's resolve to fight required radical departures in civil-military policy. As late as 1930 a disgruntled Southerner complained that as a war leader, Lincoln had resurrected "the barbarous rules of the middle ages."

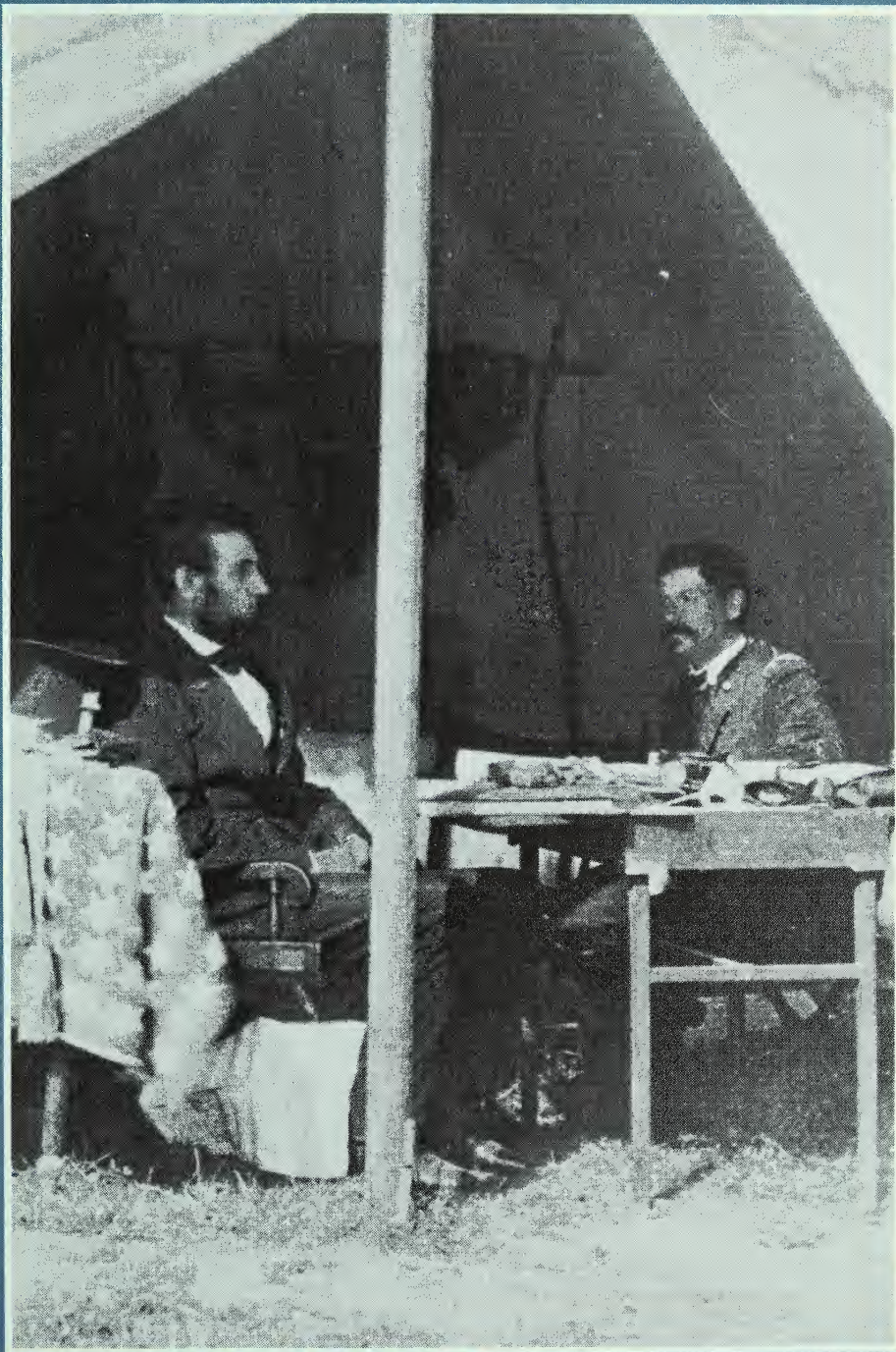


General Ulysses S. Grant



Lincoln's early blunders as a strategist—the loss of Forts Sumter, Pickens, and the Norfolk Navy Yard—resulted from his failure to establish the role of the civilian authorities in the war making process. He failed, for example, to take cabinet members into his confidence. But he was quick to learn. He read books on tactics and strategy and consulted with the North's leading military minds. Throughout the war, Lincoln made suggestions to his generals—some revealed sound military judgment, others less so. Such conferences with field commanders led many to charge him with interference in military affairs. But, as T. Harry Williams argues, "it was fortunate for the Union cause, in most cases, that he interfered." When framing policy, deciding strategy, or even suggesting tactical troop deployments, Lincoln was guided by one essential goal: to keep the Union forces always on the offensive. This is where so many of his generals failed him in the Eastern Theatre. They were too cautious, too lethargic in attacking the Confederate armies.

By the last two years of the war, Lincoln had established himself as the commander-in-chief both in name and in deed. It was this—Lincoln's establishment of the modern command system—which is his most important legacy as a strategist. Early in the war no system existed to implement strategy or coordinate strategy and national policy. After the retirement of General Winfield Scott as general-in-chief in November, 1861, the President relied on his Secretary of War and the Army Board—the heads of the War Department's several bureaus. Seeking a professional soldier to relieve him from planning strategy, in July, 1862, Lincoln appointed General Henry W. Halleck to fill Scott's vacant post. Halleck performed important functions as an advisor to the President, as a liaison with other general officers, and, according to Halleck's biographer, as "a buffer for protection from the politicians who were gleefully criticizing his [Lincoln's] military arrangements."



Lincoln conferring with McClellan at Antietam

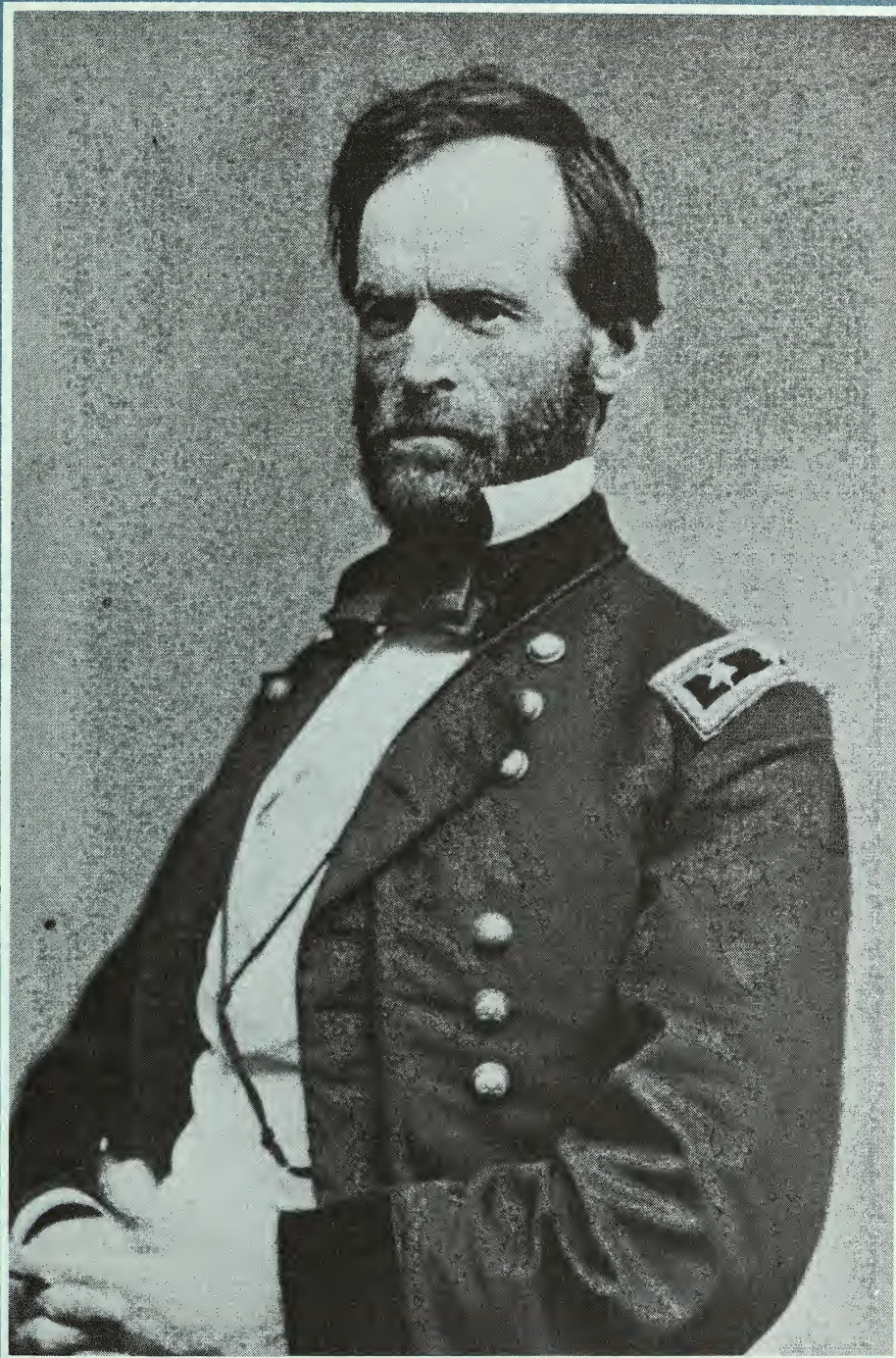


ut it was not until 1864 that Lincoln devised what became the forerunner of the modern command system. In that year he named Ulysses S. Grant general-in-chief with responsibility for the strategic planning and directing of all Union forces. Grant was a superior general who, alone among the Union commanders, had the capacity to view war on a broad scale. He shared Lincoln's belief that the Northern armies had to destroy the South's ability to recruit new armies, to prevent them from functioning as a nation. Not only did this require that the individual Confederate units be routed, but the spirit of the Southern people had to be broken as well. Lincoln and Grant recognized the value of massive raids aimed at crippling the civilian population. In doing so they foreshadowed the twentieth-century proponents of psychological warfare.

Trusting Grant's abilities, for the remainder of the war Lincoln allowed him to orchestrate the details of Confederate defeat. Halleck, who had become indispensable to the President in communicating with field commanders, served as the army's chief of staff. In this position he became a vital link between Lincoln, Grant, and his subordinates. Thus Lincoln, without recognizing his long-range contribution to our modern command system, laid its foundation in 1864. In characteristic Lincoln fashion it contained "the brilliance of simplicity": a commander-in-chief to establish overall strategy; a general-in-chief to implement plans; and a chief of staff to relay information.

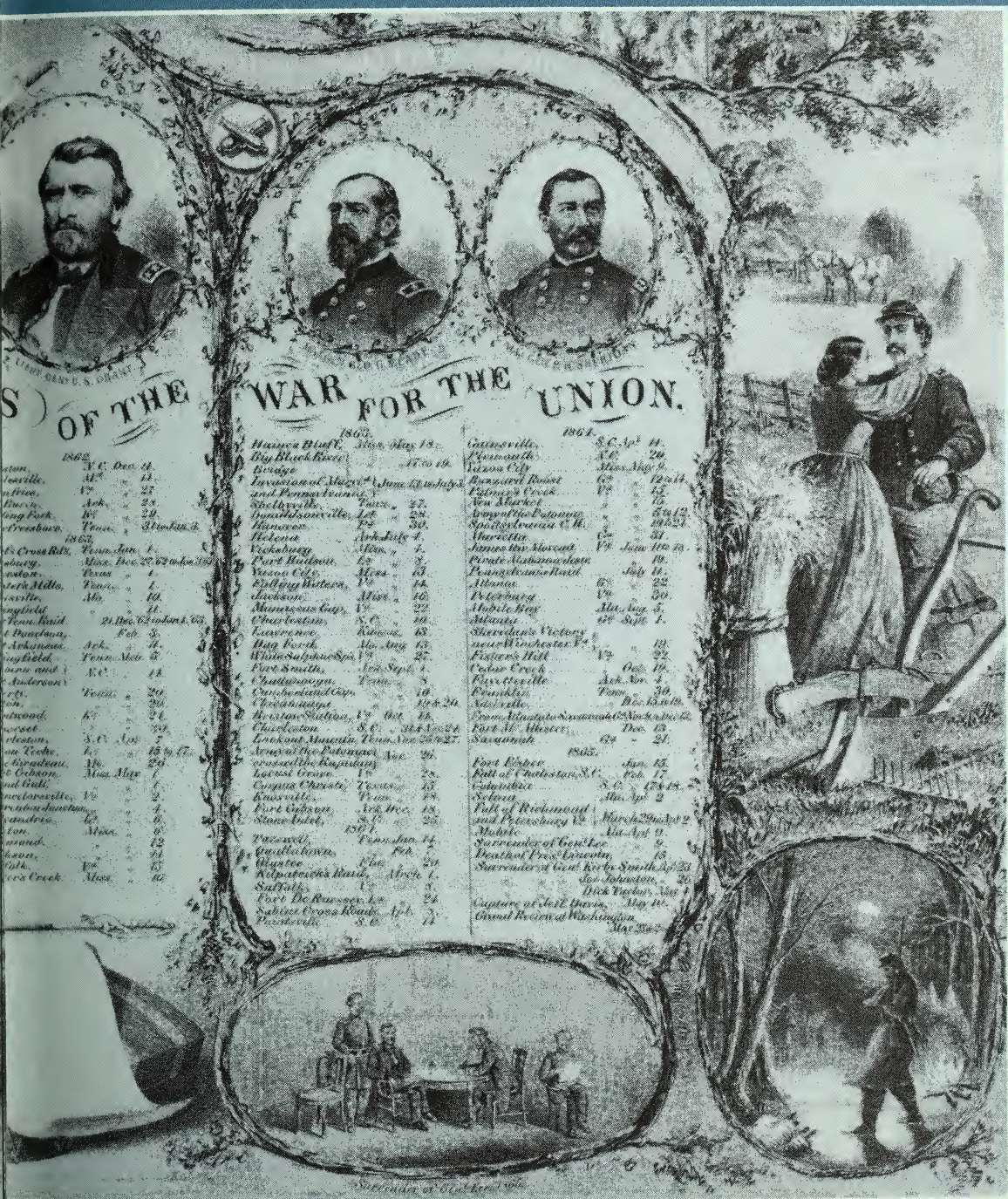
Unskilled in the art of war, Lincoln nevertheless compensated with his knowledge of humanity. While Davis remained rigid and inflexible with his generals, and overburdened himself with military details, Lincoln grew as a strategist. He asked questions; he read; he probed—anything within his power to shorten the war. Once Grant had proven himself an able commander, Lincoln played a lesser role in the waging of the war. Davis, the West Point graduate, failed to develop a command system, failed to free himself from a defensive strategy which trapped the Confederacy as effectively as any Union cordon. Proud and argumentative, Davis wasted away opportunities for victory by debating over constitutional issues. Lincoln, "a backwoods Jupiter," set his sights on only one goal: restoring the Union. Ironically, this most unlikely military man became America's apostle of modern war.

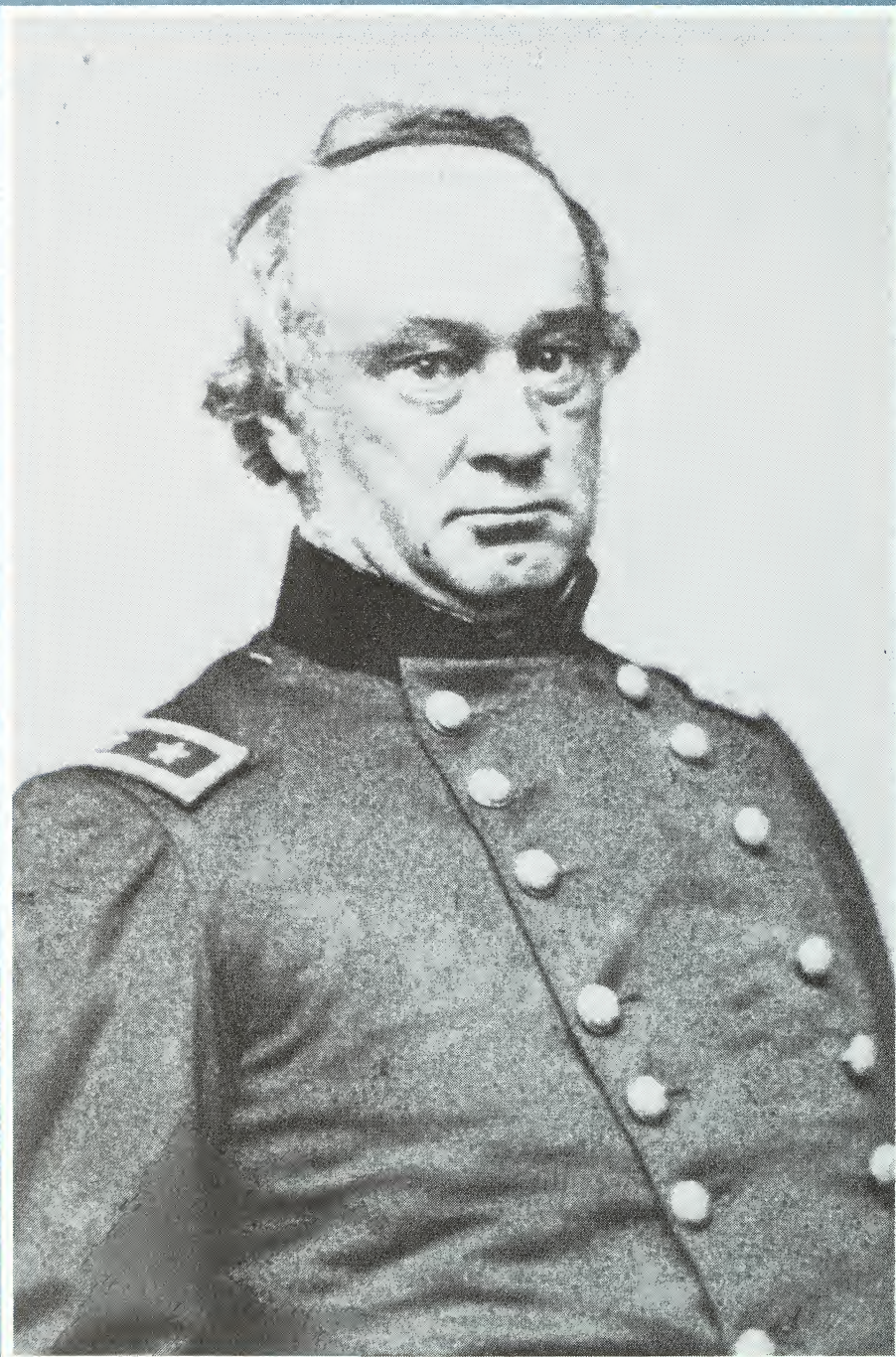
John David Smith, Ph.D.



General William T. Sherman







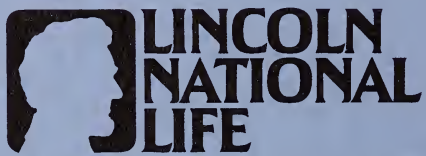
General Henry W. Halleck

Suggestions For Further Reading

In 1926 Colin R. Ballard summarized his view of Lincoln's abilities as a war leader in *The Military Genius of Abraham Lincoln*. "My theory," wrote Ballard, "is that Lincoln had a fine grasp of the big situation." He "instinctively . . . grasped the main facts and gave them their proper value." Ballard's work refuted earlier writings by G. F. R. Henderson and John C. Ropes which criticized Lincoln as an incompetent war director. Among modern scholars, T. Harry Williams has made the most salient contributions to the literature on Lincoln's military prowess. In *Lincoln and His Generals* (1952) he set forth his basic arguments. These are restated in a brief article, "Lincoln, The Military Strategist," in *Abraham Lincoln: A New Portrait* (1959), ed. by Henry B. Kranz. According to Williams, Lincoln had native military ability; but his greatest accomplishment was in forging the modern command system. Masterful essays on Lincoln's skills as a strategist also have been written by David Herbert Donald and Richard N. Current. In *Lincoln Reconsidered* (1947) Donald analyzed the impact of Jomini on nineteenth-century American military thought. Current balances both views—Lincoln as military genius and as military meddler—in *The Lincoln Nobody Knows* (1958). He concludes that "the weight of authority seems at present to be on the side of Lincoln's military greatness."

Trevor N. DuPuy's *The Military Life of Abraham Lincoln: Commander In Chief* (1969) is a useful introductory survey. It includes a discussion of the standards of military leadership, of the basic elements of military theory, and of the definitions of military strategy and tactics. Students will delight in the essays by Bruce Catton, Charles P. Roland, Donald, and Williams in *Grant, Lee, Lincoln and the Radicals* (1964), ed. by Grady McWhiney. Roland's essay reveals the degree to which Civil War strategists relied upon and went beyond Jominian theory.

In "Abraham Lincoln and Father Abraham," *North American Review*, N.S., III (1966), William Hanchett appraises Lincoln's role as a military strategist in the light of the many myths which cloud our understanding of the man. Other essays of merit include Walter P. Armstrong, "Lincoln as Commander-in-Chief," *The Saturday Review*, XXVIII (1945); Don Russell, "Lincoln Raises An Army," *Lincoln Herald*, L (1948); Catton, "Lincoln's Mastery In The Use of Volunteer Soldiers and Political Generals," *Lincoln Herald*, LVII (1955); Stephen E. Ambrose, "Lincoln and Halleck: A Study in Personal Relations," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, LII (1959); and Edward M. Coffman, "Lincoln As Military Strategist," *Lincoln Fellowship of Wisconsin Historical Bulletin* No. 23 (1968). For personal glimpses of Lincoln as war leader, *Lincoln and the Civil War in the Diaries and Letters of John Hay* (1939), ed. by Tyler Dennett, is most valuable.



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